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Lisa Hudgins

University of South Carolina - Columbia, hudgins@mailbox.sc.edu

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Research

Plain and Simple: German Stonewares from Colonial Sites

By Lisa Hudgins

Gray stonewares appear in many forms throughout the American historical landscape. Armorial jugs and incised crocks from Germany and the Netherlands grace 17th and 18th century archaeological sites. In the 19th century, simply decorated American stonewares take their place. But for those of you who have ever discovered an unidentified gray stoneware in the center of your otherwise perfect early colonial site, there may be a variety of gray and blue German stoneware to consider.

As early as the 16th century, gray and buff stonewares were being produced in Western Europe (Barber 1907; Gaimster 1997). By the early 17th century, potters had perfected a pale

gray stoneware by firing Rhenish clays in a reduced oxygen environment. Cobalt and manganese were added to produce brilliant blue

and purple accents to the gray background. The result was a range of elegant and very popular set of wares, which were exported to a broad European [and subsequently American] market. This pottery had production centers along the Rhein River valley, including a concentration in the towns of Hohn and Grenzhausen, just east of Koblenz, Germany. This “Westerwald” region of Germany was the home of hundreds of guild potters and paralleled England’s Staffordshire district as a center of pottery production and innovation.

Around the beginning of the 18th century, another type of stoneware appeared in the Netherlands, Germany, and Luxembourg (Elling 1994, Kleine 1992, Plein 2007). A



Fig. 1: Stoneware from Vreden, dated 1761.

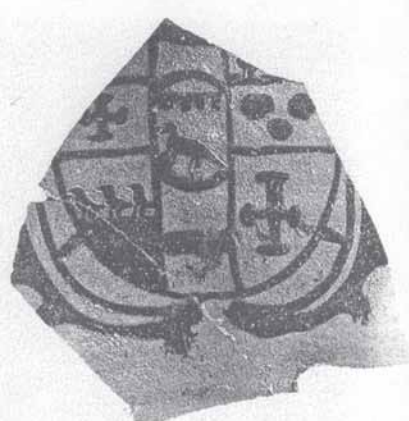


Fig. 2: Blue and gray stonewares from Vreden. (Photo by Wilhelm Elling)

simpler version of the gray and blue stonewares may have been directed at the local market, where the crocks and jugs were used for storage or transportation of wine, beer, or other processed foods like butter or pickles. These wares were free of sprig molding and incising, and often displayed decorations in the form of birds, flowers, or geometric designs. They were cheaper to make, easier to store, and appealed to local buyers, who did not need elaborate wares for their cellar or dairy.

For archaeologists and historians, this simple gray stoneware may be reminiscent of

Archaeological excavations at sites in Frechen, Vreden, and Stadtlohn reveal a broad range of hand-painted blue and grey stoneware vessels, which date to the 18th century. Flowerpots, storage jars, and corked jugs were found in Vreden and Stadtlohn, on the Netherlands border (Elling 1994) (Figs. 2 and 3), while utilitarian blue and grey stonewares (jugs, pans, etc.) were part of the production at Frechen, near Köln (Kleine 1992:51) (Fig. 4). In other areas, stoneware flasks have been found from Central German cities including Zeitz and Bürgel in Thuringia (Finke 1991) and

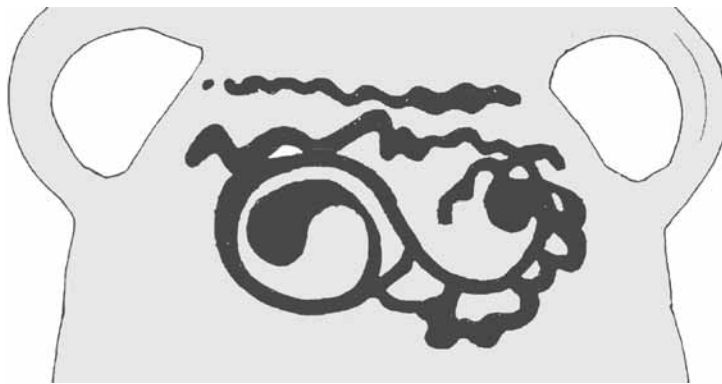


Fig. 3: Stoneware from Vreden with vine decoration. (From Wilhelm Elling, 1994)

another familiar pottery. With hand painted designs, utilitarian forms, and a comparatively small amount of incising or molded decoration, this stoneware looks remarkably like the American jugs and crocks made in the latter half of the 18th and early 19th centuries (Fig. 1). While we know of American stoneware manufacture in the early 1700s (Corselius/Crolius and Remmy in 1718, and Anthony Duché in 1730), the bulk of American potteries were not in operation until the 1770s, about the time that imports of Rhenish stoneware declined (Noel Hume 1991; Webster 1972; Husfloen 2005). Subsequently, the production period for these European utilitarian wares overlaps with the growth of American potteries.

the Speicher potters (near Trier) produced jugs and crocks in the blue and gray style (Fig. 5). Examples of these early utilitarian wares can be seen in the Speicher Heimatmuseum (Western Germany), the Raeren Topfereimuseum [<http://www.toepfereimuseum.org/>] and the Keramikmuseum Westerwald in Hahr-Grenzhausen (east of Koblenz, Germany) [<http://www.keramikmuseum.de/>].

As the Westerwald stoneware industry grew, so did the need for materials and labor. Many potters left the Rhein valley in search of a leaner market, moving north and west in a process known as the 'Ausstrahlungen' (literally, radiant

emittances) (Kuntz 1996). As these artisans infiltrated local potteries across Western Europe, they melded their particular skills with the local style. One modern historian tells of the introduction of blue-gray stoneware into the Eifel region:

The Speicher [Eifel] potters developed their own style, perfecting the medieval vascular form of the 15th century to 18th century. Only with the immigration of outside potters, primarily from the Westerwald, would there be a distinctive style breakthrough. The reduction burned, blue-gray salt firing with cobalt blue paint was adapted. But even here, the potters of the Southwest Eifel with their principle of simplicity... painted only bird motifs or fleeting brush strokes with the cobalt blue paint. [Translated from German] (Plein 2001)

The expansion of Westerwald potters, combined with the increased needs for wares for the local market, resulted in a new breed of ceramics. The question is whether or not these wares found their way into the household goods of 18th century immigrants to the American colonies. If so, the emergence of plain gray stonewares in Europe has implications for dating of ceramics assemblages on early colonial sites in the U. S. and the Caribbean. Realistically, it may have been nearly 70 years from the onset of European production before American stoneware manufacturers can produce the volume necessary to keep up with expanding demands on versatile, durable stoneware

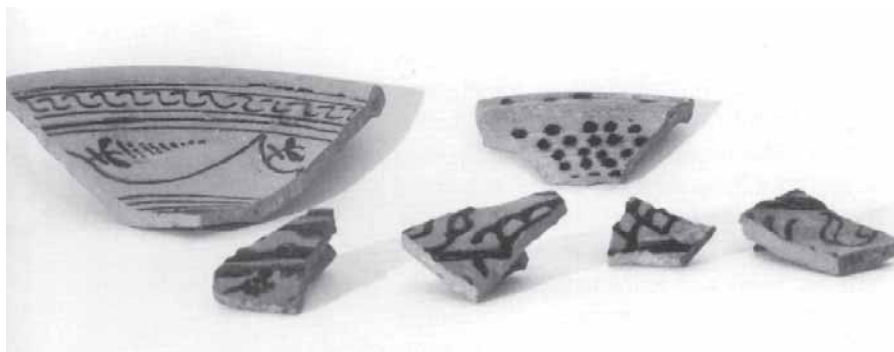


Fig. 4: Stoneware from Frechen excavations. (From Kleine, 1992)

products. This makes it possible that some of the undecorated stonewares found on colonial sites could belong to this German pottery industry.

Our current tendency is to lump all undecorated gray stonewares into the category of 19th century American wares. This often results in skewed

site dates and incorrect assumptions about trade and/or status. The impact of dated stonewares on the interpretation of early colonial sites might warrant a second look at the European pottery industry, and those previously “unidentified” grey stonewares.



Fig. 5: 18th and 19th century stoneware pottery from Speicher. (From Plein, 2007)

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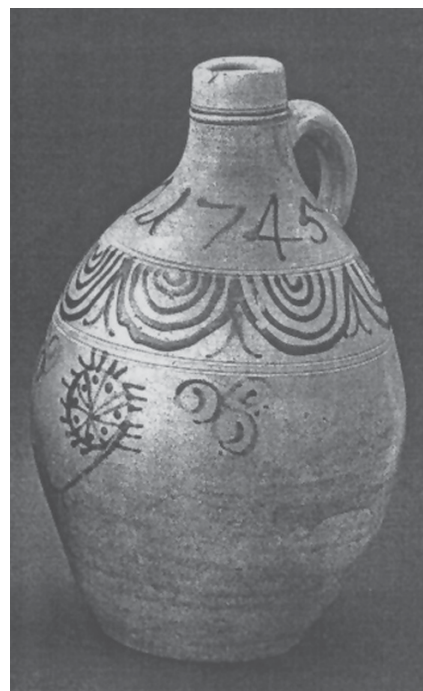


Fig. 6: Stoneware jug from Vreden, dated 1745.

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